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SUBJECT: KARZAI APPEALS TO BOUCHER FOR SECURITY IN SOUTH

Classified By: Ambassador William Wood for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher met with President Karzai January 6 to discuss security priorities and improved Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Boucher encouraged closer Afghan-Pak cooperation on intelligence sharing and told Karzai the U.S. would continue to support Afghan efforts in governance, police reform, and rule of law. Boucher and Foreign Minister Spanta discussed Pakistan President Zardari's visit to Kabul and engagement with Saudi Arabia. The Assistant Secretary also met with Afghan election officials and expressed support for the Independent Election Commission's nearly complete voter registration campaign. He conferred with local governance officials on social outreach programs and discussed police training and European engagement with U.S. military leaders.

Karzai on Improved Afghanistan-Pakisan Relations

¶2. (C) In a January 6 meeting with Assistant Secretary Boucher and the Ambassador, Karzai led a meandering discussion including his assessment of improving relations with Pakistan, the importance of improved security in the south and conspiracy theories that the U.S. was deliberately strengthening the Taliban.

¶3. (C) President Zardari was also visiting Kabul January 6 and the two presidents had discussed improved intelligence cooperation and border issues coordination. Karzai admitted he still had significant concerns about the Pakistani military and intelligence services, elements of which he believed still had ties to terrorist organizations. Most Pakistani military officers, he believed, were loyal to Nawaz Sharif, not Zardari.

Karzai on Security in Helmand and Police Reform

¶4. (C) Regarding the need for greater security in the south, Karzai stressed the symbolic importance of improving security in Helmand, where he said the current governor's authority did not extend beyond the provincial capital, and emphasized the need for U.S. military assistance there. "Get me back Helmand and Kandahar will follow," he said.

¶5. (C) Boucher pressed Karzai to provide better governance and support police reform. Karzai said he had given new Interior Minister Hanif Atmar a "double blank check" to pursue an agenda of national police reform, including widespread structural and personnel changes. Boucher welcomed the news, noting a more effective police force would create a more stable environment for troops working to improve security.

Civilian Casualties

¶ 16. (C) Karzai said civilian casualty incidents increased the perception among Afghans that Coalition forces were fighting against the Afghan people, and, as a "regular Afghan" himself, he had no choice but to give credence and voice to these concerns. "I'm the 'Tom, Dick and Harry' of Afghanistan," he said. Boucher assured Karzai that U.S. and ISAF military commanders had heard the president's concerns and were taking extraordinary steps to avoid civilian casualties.

¶ 17. (C) Karzai raised a common Afghan conspiracy theory that alleges the U.S. and/or UK are intentionally strengthening the Taliban (or Pakistan) in order to undermine the Afghan government and even Karzai himself. Boucher pointed out the illogic of such accusations in light of the resources the U.S. has committed to Afghanistan, including U.S. troops to combat the Taliban and ongoing support to strengthen Afghanistan's government. Significant U.S. aid given to Afghanistan and Pakistan showed clear commitment to both governments' success.

Foreign Minister on Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Reconciliation

¶ 18. (C) Foreign Minister Spanta told Boucher the Zardari visit had gone extremely well. He said both presidents, as well as he and Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi, enjoyed good relationships. Spanta and Qureshi have formed various working groups to expand opportunities for closer cooperation, including on cross-border transportation links.

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However, Spanta suspected the Pakistani military would try to block some of these initiatives. Boucher downplayed Pakistani military interference and said there were signs Zardari was improving his relationship with military leaders.

¶ 19. (C) Spanta asked Boucher to press for more support from Saudi Arabia. Boucher agreed the Saudis could be more engaged -- they had pledged just \$30 million for Afghanistan's reconstruction at last year's Paris Conference, in comparison to the UAE's \$250 million. Spanta also said he was personally skeptical of Karzai's pursuit of reconciliation talks with some Taliban. He said "Talibanizing" the government would be a set back for democracy. Boucher stressed the U.S. supported such initiatives in accordance with shared redlines and did not expect the talks to produce much progress before the presidential election.

Election Commission Shows Off Progress on Voter Registration

¶ 10. (SBU) Boucher congratulated the chief technical officials of the Independent Election Commission on their successes through three phases of voter registration. The commission has added more than 3 million new voters after completing registration in 30 provinces. Chief Technical Officer Daoud Ali Najafi said the commission was now fine-tuning its plans for the final phase to take place in four southern provinces. The Commission was negotiating with elders in six districts in Helmand and Kandahar that lacked a central government presence to get buy in for voter registration support. Zekria Barakzai, Najafi's deputy, said the commission is using both static and mobile registrations teams to reach more women and remote villages. Najafi said security coordination with international forces was good, but requested more air support to transport materials and officials to distant locations.

Linking Improved Security and Governance

¶ 11. (C) Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG)

chief Jelani Popal told Boucher that in 2009 government ministries and offices would better coordinate efforts to avoid last year's security setbacks. He expressed confidence in the efforts of Interior Minister Atmar, Defense Minister Wardak, and National Directorate of Security Director Saleh to improve security so that other ministries could move into more districts and establish a central government presence that provided services and social outreach programs. Positive examples of government performance would lead villagers to reject Taliban or other insurgent-led shadow governments and court systems, he said.

General Formica on Police Training and European Support

¶12. (SBU) Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) Major General Formica said the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) will begin in five districts in Wardak on March 1. Although the U.S. helped design this force, Formica said it is an Afghan-initiated program to increase security at the local district level through a public protective force under the Interior Ministry. He stressed that senior Afghan officials, from President Karzai to senior cabinet ministers, were fully committed to police training, and that they had incorporated lesson learned from past failures with auxiliary police when structuring the new force.

¶13. (SBU) Formica and Boucher discussed ways to identify areas where European allies could provide more support. Formica pointed out recent Czech helicopter contributions as an example of a country providing needed assets from existing holdings. He said diplomatic efforts to engage Europe on Afghanistan should focus on matching those militaries' strengths with Afghanistan's needs instead of across-the-board requests.

¶14. (U) This cable has been cleared by A/S Boucher.
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